

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

ROGER ELLISON

An interview conducted on

April 9, 2020

Interviewer: Lydia Dillen

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“George Ricks Memorial WWII Oral History Archive”

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DILLEN: Alright, so this is Lydia Dillen. I'm interviewing Roger Ellison over the phone. It is April 9th, 2020. Um, so let's go ahead and start with... What was your father's name?

ELLISON: My father's name was Tom, T-O-M D, capital D letter only, Ellison.

DILLEN: Alright. And when and where was your father born?

ELLISON: Daddy was born August the 14th, 1925 in Sierra Blanca, Texas. And other than his time in the military, that's where he lived his entire life. Until the last two years of his life when he lived in San Angelo in a nursing home.

DILLEN: Alright. And when and where did your father enter in the armed forces?

ELLISON: Um, Daddy officially entered the United States Navy on September the 29th, 1942. He - he graduated from high school at 16 years of age, there were only 11 grades in his school. And he tried to enlist at that time. Um, enlistment required, at age 16, required the signature of both parents. His mother would sign, but his father would not sign. So, upon his 17th birthday, the rules changed which meant that one parent could sign, and he could go into the service.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: So he signed up immediately and was shipped out, or officially entered into service on September the 29th, 1942.

DILLEN: Okay, and what were his years of service?

ELLISON: Uh, he was in the United States Navy.

DILLEN: Uh, what year did he serve until?

ELLISON: He was released on August the 13th, 1946.

DILLEN: Alright. And during his years of service was he primarily in the enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, and officer, a warrant officer...?

ELLISON: Uh, he was enlisted. Um, he - he was... he was an aircraft machinist mechanic 3. Um, and somewhere during his - the training process, his documents were lost and he spent his four years in the Navy as an AMM3, without promotion, because the Navy lost his papers.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Yeah, yeah. And - and he didn't care. You know, he had a job to do and he wanted to get it done and he wanted to get home.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And the promotion change grade was, was inconsequential to him.

DILLEN: Wow. So, um, you said that he enlisted as soon as he could out of high school. Do you know why he wanted to enlist in the armed forces, what motivated him to do so?

ELLISON: Um, wa- uh, Japan had attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. Uh, the country rallied and he was one of millions of young men who felt like it was their duty to join, to serve, uh to, to fight for their country.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And he did.

DILLEN: Mhmm. Do you know anything about what his training was like?

ELLISON: Oh, yes. Um, look um, he - he was - he was sent to Farragut, Idaho for training. And the interesting thing was that he was in the Navy, and he got sent to Farragut, Idaho. [laughs]

DILLEN: Oh.

ELLISON: Nowhere close to an ocean. [laughs] But, um, there I'm going to presume that - that he learned a lot about his trade, which was as an aircraft machinist mechanic. His job was to keep the Navy's version of the B-24 bomber flying. So the Navy's version was called the P4BY. It was a B-24 that was modified to suit the Navy's requirements. And his job, for almost his entire time in the service, was to keep those flying so my presumption is that - I mean he trained in - in a number of different locations. In Norman, Oklahoma, in Purcell, Oklahoma, in Jacksonville, Florida, in Farragut, Idaho, in Virginia Beach, and, um, somewhere else I - I forget. But, um, the bulk of that took place in Farragut, Idaho.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And when you look at a picture of that graduating class, you know, everybody's lined up on bleachers, it's a classic military graduation photo. He is the little boy in the picture.

DILLEN: Mmm.

ELLISON: They all look like men, and he is the little boy.

DILLEN: Mhmm. Um, so was your father deployed overseas?

ELLISON: Oh, yes. Uh, in December of 1942, he was shipped from Norfolk, Virginia, to a base in England called Dunkeswell. D-U-N-K-E-S-W-E-L-L. That was in the Southwestern part of England. Uh, and that was a base for the P4BYs, they were submarine hunters. And - and so he was - he was shipped to there. Um, there are - there are several interesting stories here that I think are relevant to our conversation.

DILLEN: Sure, go ahead.

ELLISON: The - the passage across the North Atlantic in December was treacherous. And, and their lives were at - at great risk. One, because of a terrible storm in which they found themselves. The storm was so bad - they were - they were shipped aboard the U.S.S. *Matagorda Bay*.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: The U.S.S. *Matagorda Bay* was a seaplane tender. Anyway, they were - they were shipped on that and in the North Atlantic they got into a terrible storm such that the ship was at risk of capsizing.

DILLEN: Mm.

ELLISON: I'm gonna make up a number because over the years, the number changed a little bit as he told the story. But let's say that the *Matagorda Bay* was designed so that it could - could lift 45 degrees to the portside, 45 degrees to the starboard side without capsizing.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: He said that in that storm the ship kept lifting within one degree of not recovering.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Yep. Just...

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Just - yeah. Just - just back and forth. And he said - obviously the goal is not to be lifting like that but to hit the waves head-on - and he said the wa - the swell, the waves were so great that the *Matagorda Bay* would go through a wave and the wave would wash over the bow of the ship. Uh, it destroyed all of the armaments on board. The guns, the - any aircraft guns, etcetera, all of those were lost in the storm. The waves were so strong. And it would wash over the entire ship. And then they would go up on top of the next wave. And the ship was several hundred feet long and so it would vibrate on top. He said you could hear it - it sounded like it was breaking.

DILLEN: Mmm.

ELLISON: The ship was just bending in two. Uh, and they would survive that and go through another wave.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: And, and it would just repeat, repeat, repeat. Um, he and another sailor were assigned watch duty. Um, and normal watch duty was four hours on and four hours off. The storm conditions were so severe that they were limited to two hours on and two hours off.

DILLEN: Mm.

ELLISON: One man was washed overboard who was trying to do what Daddy was doing.

DILLEN: Oh.

ELLISON: Uh, Daddy said he and the other fella who was alternating with him would go up on the bridge - and that's my term - wherever they were supposed to be watching, and they would tie - latch themselves to the ship so they would not be washed overboard. And their task was to find a German submarine that was shadowing them. And had the seas not been so rough, the thought was that the German submarine would've torpedoed them. But the seas were incredibly rough and Daddy said you would - you would watch for two hours and you were freezing to death, the water was just freezing on the ship everywhere, icicles hanging everywhere, icicles all over you. And you would go down and it would take you two hours to warm up and then it was your time to go do it again. There was no sleeping or anything.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: And he said the captain came to him one time and berated him for not finding that German submarine. He said they were hollering at them all the time to "find that submarine! Find that submarine! It's out there!" They knew from - from some, some, some way, I don't know why. They knew the submarine was out there. And, anyway the captain berated Daddy because, you know, he's the 17 year old kid.

DILLEN: Right.

ELLISON: Uh, because they couldn't find the submarine. And - and Daddy looks at him and he said, "Sir, I am not trying to find a German submarine. All I'm trying to do is stay alive."

DILLEN: Mm.

ELLISON: And he said about an hour later, the captain came by and apologized to him.

DILLEN: Oh, wow.

ELLISON: [laughs] In a humorous slant on that, that may be the - the only United States Navy captain that's ever apologized to us.

DILLEN: [laughs]

ELLISON: [laughs] But, um, they - they arrived - they arrived in Portsmouth, England, to disembark and to go to Dunkeswell. And the - the folks on shore had to - had to send out lumber

so that they could build gangplanks to get off the ship because all of their gangplanks had been destroyed.

DILLEN: Mm.

ELLISON: Uh, and so they built the gangplanks and they got off the ship in Portsmouth and - and he was then assigned - uh, taken to Dunkeswell. And at Dunkeswell, he was assigned to an outfit - a particular airplane and crew. And upon his assignment, he was handed a five gallon bucket - he and another fellow - were handed five gallon buckets, and they were told to go out onto the runway and pick up what they could find of their crew.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Their crew had been - an airplane had been taking off and it blew to smithereens.

DILLEN: Hm.

ELLISON: And Daddy said his first task in England was to pick up hands, and heads, and body parts of the crew that he never met.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: And his comment was, "Welcome to war, young man."

DILLEN: Mm. Wow, that's really difficult.

ELLISON: Yeah.

DILLEN: Um, was he ever wounded in action?

ELLISON: No. Um, other - other than the things I've described, he was never in action. His job was as a mechanic on the ground, in the hangars, to repair the planes and - and keep them flying - keep them in flying condition. Uh, his crew appreciated him so much that they would take him out on missions so that he could get flying time so that he would get more pay.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: But - but he never saw action. And the action these men saw - his crew would've seen - was primarily monotonous work looking for submarines that had either surfaced or that were under the water. And when they found them, depth charging them. So - but he was never involved in any combat activity.

DILLEN: Okay. So you mentioned...

ELLISON: Um...

DILLEN: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

ELLISON: Let me - let me tell you one other thing...

DILLEN: Sure.

ELLISON: ...that i- that is very interesting. So, there were a number of hangars at Dunkeswell. And one day he was instructed to go to an adjacent hangar and - and there to remove everything which was non-essential to the airplane flying. And so they basically stripped the plane of everything that wasn't necessary to fly. And he did that and never gave it a thought. He later learned that the aircraft that he had stripped was the airplane that Joe Kennedy, the older brother of President John F. Kennedy, flew to his death.

DILLEN: Oh, wow.

ELLISON: What they were doing was stripping the airplane, loading it to the hilt with munitions, and the plan was to take off, fly out over the English Channel, flip a switch, and bail out. And then it would be electronically guided - somewhat like a drone today - guided to a target in Germany which - or Norway, I forget where it was - but to a target which was a munitions manufacturing facility.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: When - when Joe Kennedy and his, um, his partner flipped the switch, the plane just evaporated. There - evidently there was an electrical short somewhere. My father had nothing to do with that. But Joe Kennedy's father had - had lo- he was an ambassador to England - he had long planned that his son, Joe, would become president of the United States.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: And - and he died there because of an electrical shortage. And Daddy was the one who stripped the plane. Daddy didn't wire the plane or pack it with munitions or anything. And Daddy didn't know Joe Kennedy from anybody else. I mean he was just somebody there on the base.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: But anyway, I always thought that was very interesting. He - he was this - he was brushed right up against a - a famous, famous story...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...and knew nothing about it at the time.

DILLEN: Right.



ELLISON: Only later in retrospect, "Oh my gosh, that's what I did."

DILLEN: Mhmm. So you mentioned, um, some of the technology for submarines. Do you know what sorts of technology that your father worked with in his service?

ELLISON: Um, no, I don't. What I do know is that these B-24s, these P4BYs were powered by very large radial engines. And Daddy was an excellent mechanic. And, um, I mean his father was a mechanic.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And he was - he was very efficient and he - he kept those planes flying. I'm sure he did other things, but substantially his job was keeping those radial engines and the other mechanisms of the airplane going. And that was probably largely, purely mechanical. Not a lot of what we would call 'modern technology' involved.

DILLEN: Mhmm. Did your father face any challenges when he returned to civilian life?

ELLISON: Um, yes. And this is kind of a sad - sad commentary but, but understandable at the same time. My father met my mother in England. And he fell in love and married my mother at St. Mary Magdalene's in Taunton, Somerset, England, which was not far from Dunkeswell. My mother was in the British Land Army. And the Land Army meant that she was involved in horticulture, agriculture, raising crops to - to feed the nation. So she was a - a young girl of... just slightly younger than my father. Not a full year younger. So she was a young girl out serving her country by - by growing - by growing food. And they met at a - at a bus stop one night, lights out. But, uh, you know they really couldn't see one another [chuckles] but they made arrangements for a date.

DILLEN: [chuckles]

ELLISON: And anyway, so they ended up being married in my mother's home town surrounded by family. We have just lots and lots of pictures of that - that occasion and that event. Anyway, um, when the war in Europe ended, my father was shipped to Japan. Now, the war in Japan was also over, but Daddy got shipped to Japan. And I'm not - not sure why. Anyway, um, he was - he was in San Diego about to ship out when he got a telegram from my mother...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...asking if he could meet her in Fort Worth. She was seven months pregnant with me.

DILLEN: Oh, wow.

ELLISON: Oh yeah, she crossed the Atlantic in February of 1946 on the *Queen Mary*, which had been converted to carrying either troops or war brides back to America. I think she was on the first ship - the first shipment of war brides to America. Anyway, um, so she was going to go

from - from Portsmouth to New York, catch a train to Sierra Blanca, Texas - to Fort Worth and hopefully meet up with my father. My - my father went to his commanding officer and requested a short leave so that he could go meet my mother and take her to Sierra Blanca to meet his parents and my mother - my mother's new in-laws and family. So his commanding officer declined and my father was persistent. He kept coming back, coming back, coming back...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...and finally, the commanding officer told him, "Tom Ellison, if you can find somebody to take your place, I'll give you a short leave." So he went back to his barracks, talked to the first buddy he came to, and the guy said, "Sure, I'll go." And so Daddy took off from San Diego by train to s- to Fort Worth, met my mother, and they could not get a hotel room. Because no one in Fort Worth would, um, would rent a room to a man in uniform.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: The fact - the fact that he - you know, the war was over, I'm sure a lot of the folks home were celebrating rambunctiously. My father was with his - his wife who was very pregnant...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...and he still could not get a room. And they went all over downtown Fort Worth asking and getting turned down, and turned down, and turned down. And he finally looked at my mother and he said - and I'm gonna make up this name because I don't remember the name of the hotel - he said, "We're going back to the Commerce." And she said, "Tom, they've already turned us down." He said, "I know the owner, he's from Sierra Blanca."

DILLEN: Mmm.

ELLISON: So m - so my father walked in and the fellow behind the counter said, "I've already told you there's no room." And he said, "Is Mr. O'Keefe in? Is Joel O'Keefe in?" And he said, "How do you know Joel O'Keefe?" And he said, "He's from my town of Sierra Blanca. He practically raised me. I want to ask him if I can have a room for my wife and myself." The man stepped into the back and came out and said, "Mr. Ellison, they'll have a room for you."

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: And I - I really think that was the greatest problem he had coming back and adjusting to, um, to life back in his hometown. He had a job with his father, he went to work as a mechanic. He did that his entire life. I think that was the - the greatest difficulty but it was kinda sad...

DILLEN: Right.

ELLISON: ...that he couldn't get a room. And had he not known Joel O'Keefe owned that hotel - Joel O'Keefe was a rancher - had he not known that, they might have slept on the street that night.

DILLEN: Mmm. Right. You mentioned that your father met your mother in England. Uh, when did they meet?

ELLISON: Um, somewhere... somewhere '42. I mean, uh, '43, '44. Somewhere in that time period. I think they were married... I think their anniversary was December of '45? No, no, no. No, no. Maybe December of '44. December or January of '45.

DILLEN: Alright.

ELLISON: So - so somewhere in that time period. I don't know that story.

DILLEN: Oh, okay.

ELLISON: Uh, I know... you know, as his time off would permit and her time off would permit, they had a courtship. They went to - um, they went to London one time when each had a few days off. And that would've been, by train, a couple of hours away. And being very proper, they had - they had two rooms. He had a room somewhere where, on one of the floors of the hotel. My mother had a room in the basement and during the night, the air raid sirens went off. There was a phone in my mo- in my father's room and it rang off the wall and it was my mother screaming in fear. And he went down to find her sitting in the middle of the bed with covers all - pulled all around her and just screaming.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: And just scared to death. And Daddy went up to the desk and asked where - where the shelter was and the guy at the desk said, "Your wife..." or, not your wife. Uh, "...Mrs. Louis is in the shelter." So her room being underground was as close as they had to shelter. He said when they woke up the next day the buildings around them were gone.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: So, you know, we have pictures of them during their courtship and this and that but I don't know dates as to when they met, how long it took for him to propose marriage, and I don't even remember exactly when they got married. I think - I think it was maybe January of - of '44.

DILLEN: Okay. Um, so do you know how your father's service influenced or affected his family at home?

ELLISON: Um, I think the key to that is in all of those letters that I've - I've given y'all.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: I don't know that. What I do know is that his father would not sign for him to go into the service. His father was afraid he was gonna lose him.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: His mother said - and you have to understand these are... these people are products of the Depression. My father is a Depression kid so he grew up in poverty. And, you know, poverty in the midst of the Depression so that's kinda like a double dose. Anyway, his mother said to him, "Tom, there is a chance you will never come back...

DILLEN: Mm.

ELLISON: "...but there is also the probability that you're going to learn a skill and can have a decent job when you come home." And so, what that - what that told me was that to her, there was great risk but there was a chance worth taking for the future. That the future could be better if he served.

DILLEN: Right.

ELLISON: Um, beyond that, you know, he had a sister - he had two sisters, his brother died in infancy. Uh, they - they continued to live there during the war. I don't know that there was any deleterious impact on them. I - I'm sure like every mother and father, they worried every day that the vehicle would arrive and the men in uniform would come to give them the bad news.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: I'm sure - you know, every parent in America lived with that. And so they were not any different.

DILLEN: Right.

ELLISON: But that - that's about all I can tell you on that.

DILLEN: Okay. So you mentioned after the war your father got a job as a mechanic. What did your mother do after the war?

ELLISON: Raised us. My mother was a stay-at-home mom until... until about the time I went off to college. And then she went to work - she was still a British subject, she was not an American.

DILLEN: Okay.

ELLISON: Um, she went to work for the, uh, for the county clerk at - in the county courthouse. Sierra Blanca is the county seat of Hudspeth County. So she went to work for Bernice Elder as one of her deputies. And then somewhere along the way when Bernice retired

and Pat Bramblett was elected county and district clerk, Momma continued working for, uh, for Pat. And I think retired - or left work about the time she died. She died prematurely.

DILLEN: Hm. Did your father have any military friends that he stayed in contact with after the war ended?

ELLISON: Um, yes and as time went on those relationships got - got thinner and thinner. Um, one of the guys from his outfit was a photographer, and he took - he took many of the pictures at Mom and Daddy's wedding. Um, he became a famous NASA photographer. And at the moment his name escapes me. But Daddy kept up with that man for a long time. Um, some of the others, they would write letters back and forth and then they became greetings at Christmas time, and then someone would pass away and the letters would stop. Daddy kept up with as many of his people as he could and every once in a while someone would stop in Sierra Blanca at his mobile station, garage, etcetera, and visit.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: But - and you know, because of his service, he also ended up, you know, making acquaintances with lots of people who might've served in the same places, served alongside him or whatever.

DILLEN: Right.

ELLISON: Somewhere in the, um, in the late '80s... I think it was the late '80s. It could've been the early '90s but I think it was the late '80s, he went to a military function in New Mexico where - where a bunch of people were being honored for their service. And Daddy met a man there and they began to talk about their time in the service. And when Daddy was shipped to Japan, he was no longer assigned to a P4BY crew, he was - he was assigned to a, um, a Catalina crew. A Catalina was a, um, a flying boat.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And they, too, were submarine hunters. Um, and either - I think it was in China. In China, they were, um, they hit a buoy with... with the forward part of the fuselage.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And - and the water came gushing in and Daddy and another person were trying to get out. And the pilot secured the hatches so they couldn't, which meant Daddy and this man were going to drown.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Um, but he would save the airplane. A Seabees crew, they were the engineers. They built things. They built bases and bridges and all that sort of stuff, buildings... a Seabees crew

saw what was happen - happening and they pulled that airplane ashore and one, kept the airplane from sinking, them losing it... and saved my father's life and this other man's life.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: And Daddy and that man determined that they had met each other in China and had no idea who each other was. But here they were - that was 1946 and here it was - let's say it was '86. Forty years later they run into one another not knowing each other but one had - had saved the other one's life.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: So Daddy kept up with his close mates as best he could, but he - he made friendships with a lot of people along the way that had served.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And that meant a - that meant a lot to him. That man, the, uh, the photographer... One night at Dunkeswell, they were confined to quarters and they were given lights-out instructions and it was not a normal lights-out, it was sort of an upgraded lights-out instruction...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...and the Quonset huts - the half-moon huts in which they lived - had double doors on one end. You entered into a portico and then when the door behind you was closed you can open another portico, uh, another door and go inside where you're - where the barracks was. And in that little portico would've been - it was kind of a mechanical room - the electrical connections, fuse boxes, probably some storage and so forth. But designed so that there was no way light could escape. There - they had been apprised of - of a German bombing raid. And - and they had to make sure there was absolutely no light that anyone could see to give away a location. So, my father was in bed, um, because there was nothing else to do - it was lights-out and they were supposed to be in bed - and the other guys were up playing poker. And Daddy, again, the young kid, kept telling them, "You're not supposed to be doing that. You're - it's supposed to be lights..." "Tom, leave us alone, we're doing fine." And, you know, it went on and on and finally my father, who was short-tempered...

DILLEN: [chuckles]

ELLISON: ...got up and went out into the portico and pulled the fuse out of the fusebox. Unscrewed the fuse.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: And this voice said, "Tom, put that fuse back!" And he said, "I'm not gonna do it!" And he said, "Tom..." - Daddy said, "I'm not gonna do it, we're supposed to have lights out." He said, "Tom, put the fuse back in there. I'm telling you." And Daddy said, "You're

gonna have to make me." And about that time, a bullet went through the Quonset hut over Daddy's head.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: Daddy said he put the fuse back in, went to his bed, and went to sleep. Shut up, didn't say anything the rest of the night. But that was his buddy, the best man at his wedding. The photo- his, his great buddy the photographer who fired that shot from his pistol saying, "Tom, I'm serious, put it back." [laughs]

DILLEN: Oh my goodness.

ELLISON: Yeah. He thought a lot of that guy.

DILLEN: Mhmm. Are there any other stories that you remember that you would like to share?

ELLISON: Um, oh my gosh. There - there are just so many stori- okay, so they get to Japan, and they are told that there are caves. And I don't know - Sasebo, Japan. They were told that there were - there were caves there and they were to stay out of them. Well, that's kind of like telling a kid, "There's candy in that drawer and don't get any of it." Well he's gonna get it.

DILLEN: [laughs]

ELLISON: And he said - so on their day off, where did the guys go? They went to the caves. And they explored the caves and he said they found that they had carved beds into the rock in the caves, they had carved storage areas, they found, um, they found rifles, they found food, they found all kinds of things. And again, not supposed to do this, he took one of those guns back to his barracks with him. And when he was dismissed - uh, no when his time up came... when his time to be released from the service came, he had resolved to bring that rifle home with him. Well, that was against all the regulations.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And supposedly they were gonna check his duffle bag. I still have the duffle bag. Um, anyway, there are two stories within this. And so, so, he goes to his commanding officer and says, "I signed up for four years or the duration." He said, "Both of the wars are over, and my four years is up." And he said he had to keep going back to 'em and back to 'em and finally they said, "Okay, you can go home." And he says "Well, how do I get there?" And he said - they said, "Well, you just go by ship." And he said, "Oh no, no I have air priority. I'm - I'm in the naval air force, I have air priority and you're flying me back."

DILLEN: [chuckles]

ELLISON: And they argued about that for days and finally they realized he was right and they relented and he flew back from Japan, with a bunch of hops I'm sure, to San Diego. And the

interesting thing was that he carried that gun with him in his napsa- in his duffle bag and no one ever checked it.

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: And he later had the '31 Japanese converted to a 308 Winchester and that was my gun. I still own it. It doesn't look like the military - the Japanese military gun that it was, but I still have it and, on occasion, use it.

DILLEN: Hmm. That's interesting.

ELLISON: Yeah, yeah. Um, I - you know, I'll probably think of 23 stories when we - when we get off the phone but there are some of the, you know, the key points that I can think of.

DILLEN: Mhmm. And do you have... I know you shared some of the letters with us - well, all of the letters with us - but did your father keep anything from his service that he liked to remember it by?

ELLISON: Oh, yes. Oh he kept - he kept all kinds of things. He has - he has a collection of coins. Some of them I'm sure are Japanese, some of them are Chinese, uh, many of them are British. They are, unfortunately, mixed in. I mean, I can separate the British ones out very easily and the - the Oriental ones. Um, but he kept - he kept lots of things like that. He - you know, he had medals, his duffel bag, little things of memorabilia that just reminded him of his time. I found part of a bracelet that was made with sixpences, uh, English sixpences. I'm guessing that he made that for my mother.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: I don't really know. Momma never really wore it, it was garish but... He found a crown, which would be a British coin worth 20 pounds - I think I've got that right - from 1696...

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: ...that he - that he found in circulation in England.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: Lots - lots of things like that.

DILLEN: Okay.

ELLISON: And - and most of those, if, once I get sorted through those things, if y'all would like to have them, it would be an honor for us to share them with you.

DILLEN: Hmm. I'm not sure if we'll take the objects but we'll definitely love to look at them and take pictures.



ELLISON: Sure. Sure, and that would be fine. And - and I also have... I have his discharge papers, I have certificates, I have - I have letters congr- thanking him for his service and letters providing instructions for after the military life and here's one in my hand right now. August 28th, 1946 - "My dear Mr. Ellison," and it's signed "James Forrestal." James Forrestal was the secretary of the Navy. When I was growing up, there was an aircraft carrier named for James Forrestal.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: Is this his real signature or was this an aide's signature? I don't know. But Daddy kept lots of, uh, lots of things like that.

DILLEN: Mhmm. Um, going back, you mentioned a Joel O'Keefe? Could you spell that for me?

ELLISON: Joel - Joel O'Keefe, yes.

DILLEN: Could you spell that for me?

ELLISON: I don't know how to spell it. Here - here's what I - in my notes from a long time ago I s- I have imagined "Joel" as J-O-E or J-O-E-L. I listened to my father carefully and I think it was J-O-E-L but I'm not sure. And O'Keefe is probably O-apostrophe- capital K-E-E-F-E. I have looked in the cemetery in Sierra Blanca, I cannot find a gravestone. So my guess is he is buried elsewhere or, um, without - you know, without a headstone.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: I've talked to people in Sierra Blanca and asked them how to spell his name, I can take you to the house that he used to live in, etcetera. But I've never been able to - to nail that down for certain. But I would go with J-O-E-L O-apostrophe-capital K- and the O is capitalized- capital K-E-E-F-E.

DILLEN: Okay. Alright, is there any other stories, any other things you would like to mention?

ELLISON: Um, yes. Yes. Um - and this is the story of many young men and women who - who served during WWII - um, my father was - was, um... My father graduated from high school at - at 16 years of age. He - he had a very - in a very, very small school. He had lifetime relationships with the people who were in his class and he - he treasured those relationships. But, um, he - he was very bright and he earned a tuition scholarship to SMU.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: And in his mind and his heart he couldn't take advantage of that because his first duty was to his country.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: And so, he went off to war. And in war, he met and married my mother and that changed his life. He told me one time, he said, "I would've loved to have been - to have spent a career in the United States Navy. But that is no way to raise a family.

DILLEN: Hmm.

ELLISON: "It is not right to c- to drag a family all around the world or to be gone for so long. And so I didn't do it." I remember the day when he was 37 years old, he said, "Today I would've retired."

DILLEN: Wow.

ELLISON: 37 years old he said, "Today I would've retired. I would've spent my 20 years in the United States military."

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: Oh my gosh. 37? [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

ELLISON: And - and so this kinda goes back to the adjusting to a new life after the war. The young couples in Sierra Blanca formed a club called the Riff Raff. R-I-F-F R-A-F-F, two words. And I don't - are you familiar with that term?

DILLEN: Yes.

ELLISON: Okay, okay. So they formed a club called the Riff Raff. And they got together for special occasions. They went picnicking, they went camping, they did all kinds of things in the Sierra Blanca area, down into Fort Davis, Alpine, Marfa area. They did all kinds of things, and it was a great re-entry into American life. And it was a time of great optimism and - and the world was - was at their beckoning and there were no limits. And the Riff Raff was sort of the epitome of that.

DILLEN: Mhmm. That's cool. I'm sure that was...

ELLISON: Yeah.

DILLEN: ...a great way for him to get back into civilian life.

ELLISON: Yeah. And I found a - found a Riff Raff card one day. [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

ELLISON: You know, you know you had to have a membership card. It was useless, but you had to have one. [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

ELLISON: Um, I don't know if I said this earlier or not, but one of the things that - a lot of people think because you served in the military, you served during time of war, that you're all gung-ho about it.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: Well Daddy had interesting stories about it, but Daddy's perspective on war was that it's blood politics. And so he had a very jaundiced view of war. He called it blood politics.

DILLEN: Mhmm. That's interesting.

ELLISON: Yeah.

DILLEN: Alright. So, was there anything else you'd like to mention before we finish?

ELLISON: I - I can't think of it right now. Uh, I've - I've told you a lot.

DILLEN: [chuckles] Yes.

ELLISON: Some of these stories, which I hope are remarkably the same as I have told you, are on file, video - uh, not video taped but audio taped at the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: I hope his and my stories jive, I think so.

DILLEN: [laughs] I'm sure.

ELLISON: [laughs]

DILLEN: I'm sure. Well thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

ELLISON: Yes. And, when the time is right, I will have assembled some things that might be interesting to, you know, to photocopy or to take pictures of or whatever...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

ELLISON: ...for, uh, for the records. But thank you.

DILLEN: No, thank you!